

TAKING STOCK OF EDUCATIONAL R&D. RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire

As a means to assess the process, the quality and the impact of the CERI reviews of national educational R&D a questionnaire was sent to all experts and national co-ordinators involved in the five reviews (New Zealand, England, Mexico, Denmark, and Switzerland). The questionnaire had two versions, one for the experts (21 questions) and another, slightly different for the national coordinators (22 questions). Both of them were organised in five different sections:

- Personal information
- Quality of the review
- Impact
- Preparation and process
- General lessons

Twenty questionnaires were sent out in April 2007, fifteen to the international experts and five more to the national coordinators. Nine experts and three coordinators responded. At least two responses per country were received.

Overall results

With such a small number of responses this preliminary analysis naturally deals with qualitative information. First, though, a brief overview of the ratings. Among the items, three questions were included with the aim of getting a general indication of satisfaction regarding the quality, the impact and the process of the review. These three questions offered a range of five possible responses from 1 (absolutely unsatisfactory) to 5 (extremely satisfactory). The results are presented in the following table.

Overall impression

| | Quality | Impact | Process |
|---------|---------|--------|---------|
| Average | 4.2 | 3.7 | 4.3 |
| Mode | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Range | 4 to 5 | 2 to 5 | 3 to 5 |

The overall impression is rather satisfactory –both the average and the mode values are 4 or around 4, with a slight indication of an even more positive evaluation of the quality and of the preparation and the process of the review than of its impact. Interestingly, three respondents refused to

answer the item regarding impact, arguing either that not enough time had passed since the review took place or that they were missing the relevant data to judge this.

The information on the range of responses obtained (as opposed to the possible range, from 1 to 5) shows high convergence on the assessment on quality, and much less so when it comes to impact, where one respondent had an unsatisfactory impression.

Finally, it is also worth noting that there are no significant differences among the respondents according either to the review in which they were involved or to their status (expert or national coordinator).

To sum up, the responses show a widespread level of satisfaction, which is slightly inferior in the case of the assessment of the impact of the reviews. The following sections present the results and comments obtained in the different sections of the questionnaire.

Quality of the reviews

Overall assessment

There is no surprise in seeing that all responses advocate for the quality of the reviews in view of the fact that all respondents were directly involved in their development. But considering that the respondents never had the opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the reviews in detail, it is nevertheless surprising the level of congruence on this, both on the positive and in the negative aspects.

What appear to be the two most important strengths of the reviews are that they:

- brought independent and sometimes fresh perspectives from the outside and let the country benefit from an informed, external critique of the R&D system which sometimes was said to “shake up” the system, and
- produced a final report under a well sustained theoretical framework, that of the knowledge management, which lead to the design and refinement of a still valuable template.

Many responses mention that this is an obvious outcome of a balanced choice of international experts, and it is often argued that the quality and expertise of the review team, with an international and multifaceted approach, was crucial to the quality of the resulting report.

However, the respondents also show a certain degree of consensus regarding the weaknesses of the report. Again, two appear to be the most repeated:

- the lack of time, expressed as a very tight time frame for the visits, with too little time allowed for each interviewee, possibly resulting in mistakes being made, and
- the lack of opportunities for discussing the results with the main stakeholders once the report was presented and, even more importantly, for a follow up of the degree of implementation of the recommendations.

There were, however, contradictory views regarding the ownership of the review and the implications of this – for example, whether the review served the purposes of the government or of some stakeholders interested in putting pressure on the national researcher community, or of the

researchers who used the report as a means to engage the government in a discussion about improving funding opportunities for educational research.

The experts' report vs. the background report

The review process included two main outcomes: the country background report, prepared by a national coordinator according to a pre-established framework provided by CERI, and the experts' report resulting from their visit. The questionnaire included two questions intended to compare the views regarding each of these.

There is again consensus that the main strengths of the examiners' report were related to the use of a clear framework, which resulted in the development and refinement of a template. The use of such a framework allowed for a clear conceptual integration and coverage of the main issues from a systemic perspective, and for delivering clear key messages, sometimes very critical.

There is less consensus regarding the weaknesses of the examiners' report: some respondents suggest that it was too short, reflecting again that more time should have been devoted to the visit, thus enabling for greater refinement and accuracy; others emphasise that the report provides a very general overview, which sometimes does not take enough into account the diversity of perspectives, actors and subfields that exist inside educational research.

The country background report is crucial in any review, but since it is commissioned by the contracting authority there is always a risk of reflecting its particular views. This is why the questionnaire asked about its quality, validity and usefulness. In this respect, all experts recognise the importance of the country report as a necessary background but also emphasise that it is vulnerable because of its origin. In one particular country, the experts criticise the lack of information at system level, although it is recognised that this might be a failure of the system and not of the report as such. In another review the experts suggest that the country report tends to reflect the agenda of the contracting authority, thus contesting the validity of its approach, but this view is contrasted with the statements of the experts involved in another review and who checked the validity of the report with a positive result. Therefore, the overall assessment is that all country background reports were produced in a very professional manner, although at least in some cases it would have been better to carry out primary research to fill the report with more updated empirical data.

Missing data or issues

In terms of missing meaningful data, the respondents tend to be rather satisfied with the coverage of data provided. In some cases it is mentioned that more quantitative data should have been available, for example regarding the number of doctoral dissertations in the field –although the real issue is whether this kind of data is easily available. The following four areas summarise what the respondents suggest as relevant missing data:

- the rationale for launching the review, i.e. why is the contracting authority willing to have the field reviewed;
- the effectiveness of educational R&D, meaning by that an evaluation of the real impact of research;
- the economics of educational R&D and, in particular, how the funding mechanisms work, and

- the broader context of research in the country, although the latest review already contained some information about this.

In terms of topics to be explored further, three emerge as not really covered by any of the reviews. These are the following:

- The international links and networks of the national research community, as well as the sharing of research evidence across countries;
- A possible inter-sectoral agenda, which should include the priorities for educational R&D in the wider picture of the national needs and aspirations in terms of socio-economic development; and
- The whole issue of research ethics and, in particular, the risks and benefits of user involvement in priority setting.

Possible improvements

The assessment on the quality of the review was completed by an open question intended to suggest possible improvements for future reviews. Although most respondents opted to add nothing else to what they already signalled as missing data or issues, a few of them suggested some improvements mainly in three areas:

- The reviewers team, suggesting that a clear division of labour could be more operational, that the team could be larger and, finally, that the inclusion of a practitioner should be studied;
- The time issue, since it is claimed that more time would allow for a closer review but also would result in better opportunities for interaction among the team members; and
- Counting more on the stakeholders, both at the beginning, when a self-assessment report could serve to the purpose of conveying different voices and supplement the country background report, and at the end when the review is completed, making more effort to disseminate the report and discuss its implications.

Impact of the reviews

This last point raises, once again, the issue of dissemination and impact of the reviews, for whose evaluation there were some items included in the questionnaire. At this point, it is important to remember that the impact was the issue assessed less positively by the respondents.

A first item was intended to gather views on the impact of the review in the country being reviewed. In this respect, the majority of experts confess to not having a clear idea of that –except those who, for professional reasons, have travelled to the country since the review took place. What also emerges from the responses is that in Mexico nothing happened after the review and that in Switzerland it may be too early to say. However, the responses regarding the three other countries indicate some clear outcomes in, for instance, the New Zealand Evaluation Strategy and the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, the Danish clearing house on educational R&D, and the English Strategic Forum for Research in Education. So, in fact, the impact is easily recognisable in these three countries and not at all in the former two.

A strong consensus exists on how the impact could be assessed, since it is often repeated that the impact needs to be evaluated against the original aim of the review, which might have not actually been the same for the five countries. Obviously, if the review is intended to produce some recommendations to improve the state and relevance of educational R&D both for policy making and educational practice, the obvious way of assessing its impact would be to follow up the implementation of these recommendations –but nothing has been planned in this area so far.

The last item regarding the impact of the reviews was designed to give the respondents an opportunity to reflect on any possible influences that their participation in this process might have had on the way they look now at educational research, either nationally or more broadly speaking. Many experts state that their participation in the review has truly influenced their current views about educational research, although in different ways. Some agree that the analytical framework and, when it was available, the template are valuable to any examination of educational research under the perspective of knowledge management –as a matter of fact, it is mentioned that it has been used in the national debates on educational research in one country not participating in the reviews and also, in another country, for teaching purposes. Others mention ideas or areas where they have benefitted from international borrowing, importing to their countries or institutions some initiatives or tools they judged to be relevant or, in some cases, simply the knowledge management approach to review educational R&D. Finally, possibly in a less positive tone, some respondents agree that they learned from the review the many weaknesses of educational research, particularly regarding its funding and low esteem, its lack of internal coherence as a field and the missing link with policy and practice.

Preparation and process of the reviews

There is an overwhelming positive assessment of all aspects involved in the preparation of each of the reviews and also on how the review itself worked. However, the dynamics of each review were slightly different, much due to the fact that different teams of experts were in place. In general, there is a positive appreciation of the opportunities for exchange among experts, although often more time would have been welcome.

Three aspects are suggested for future improvements:

- To hold a briefing session (half a day) before the review begins between the national coordinator and the experts, as well as some by-side material to get a wider context than that offered by the country background report –often the only gateway to the national educational research arena for the international experts;
- To devote more effort on the dissemination of the report and the discussion of its implications at national level; and
- To have the mandating authority informing CERI's Governing Board about outcomes, dissemination and impact some time after the report has been issued, i.e. a couple of years later.

General lessons and conclusions

Finally, the questionnaire asked a couple of questions regarding the lessons that could be learned from this exercise. There are not many substantial responses here, probably because the previous items offered enough opportunity to suggest possible improvements. Even so, there appear to be lessons, particularly for the OECD, in three areas:

- First of all, at a substantial level, the main lesson is how low the provision of educational R&D is and how badly connected its results are in relation to educational policy making and practice. In fact, the reviews can be said to challenge preconceived notions of the role of educational research, particularly regarding its impact. Some cases suggest that it is possible to have a very good educational system without much home-grown educational research, because most educational research is of poor quality and really not very helpful in improving educational delivery in any case. Most educational reforms are ideologically based, not evidence-based, and so the role of R&D is not very clear. And even if R&D produces some clear-cut results, it is doubtful that they would change the direction governments take in educational policy.
- Secondly, at a procedural level, it becomes clear that national authorities should have a stronger commitment to the dissemination of the results and, accordingly, that the OECD should not engage in this kind of exercise unless there is an agreement on an ulterior follow-up. In other words, there has to be a clear commitment to the measurement of the impact of the reviews.
- Finally, looking into the future the real value of these reviews could be greatly improved by engaging more countries in a shorter period of time, thus allowing for international comparative analysis and meta-analysis of educational R&D. As expressed by one respondent, these reviews should be part of the permanent portfolio of CERI.